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ABSTRACT

Supplemental Instruction (SI) has been firmly established as a tool for helping college students succeed in beginning writing courses. The SI model is based on a Piagetian-constructivist theoretical framework, which holds that learning is an active process in which learners "construct" their own knowledge, making it an essential part of themselves. SI leaders must therefore become "facilitators," people who help others learn, rather than "tutors" or "teachers" who dispense knowledge. A study was conducted at Black Hills State University, which has an open admission policy and high attrition and dropout rates in the first writing course. A pilot program in Supplemental Instruction was established at this college after the South Dakota Board of Regents mandated some specific form of remediation for students who were having difficulty. Five sections of English 101 were selected for the program. A diagnostic essay was administered at the beginning and end of the experimental, control and remaining (non-participating) sections. Results validated that the SI can help students improve writing skills, raise grades, reduce failure and lower attrition. A significant difference in improvement in scores appeared among the experimental sections, the control sections, and the remaining sections. One limitation of the study was that the scorers were aware that they were looking at end-of-the-semester essays; ideally, it would have been better if beginning- and end-of-the-semester essays had not been identified as such. (Contains 10 references.) (TB)

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WRITING PARTNERS: IMPROVING WRITING AND LEARNING THROUGH SUPPLEMENTAL INSTRUCTION IN FRESHMAN WRITING CLASSROOMS

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Introduction. The title of this conference, "Teaching for Lifelong Learning," accurately describes the goal of Supplemental Instruction. Taking the idea of collaborative learning a step further, SI links formal classroom pedagogy with personal, interactive learning through trained tutors who mediate between classroom and self. Hardly any classroom could be more appropriate for Supplemental Instruction than the freshman writing course, where beginning writers often confront the writing task with attitudes of fear and alienation. SI can help these students gain confidence in themselves and their writing, and in the process acquire skills that will help them succeed in the course, their academic careers, and ultimately their lifelong learning.

Review of Literature. Supplemental Instruction has been firmly established as a tool for helping college students succeed in beginning writing courses. Begun in 1974 by Deanna C. Martin at the University of Missouri-Kansas City (Martin, Blanc, and DeBuhr, 1982), the model has been extended to over four hundred institutions of higher learning in the United States. Participation in SI can significantly reduce course failure, improve average course grades, and reduce attrition (Martin and Arendale, 1983, 1993; Cobb, 1983; Wolfe, 1987; Congos, 1993; Zaritsky, 1994).

The SI model is based on a Piagetian-constructivist theoretical framework. This theory holds that learning is an active process in which learners "construct" their own knowledge, making it an essential part of themselves so they can produce, share, and transform it. SI student leaders or tutors must therefore become "facilitators"—people who help others learn—rather than "tutors" or "teachers" who dispense knowledge (Zaritsky, 1994, p.1). SI programs have the following characteristics: (1) SI targets *all* students, not only those at risk; (2) tutors must be trained and caring individuals; (3) SI

tutors are required to attend classes and complete assignments along with other students; (4) tutors are trained to view themselves as facilitators who model how to perform analysis and synthesis; (5) SI tutors are given an intensive training program; and (6) all students are encouraged to participate in the SI program so as to avoid the stigma associated with traditional tutor programs (pp. 1-2).

Background of the Present Study. Black Hills State University has served as an open enrollment institution; given this fact, relatively high failure and attrition rates in the beginning writing class (English 101) were not surprising. Since 1982, the BHSU English department faculty has observed the factors surrounding the failure and attrition (dropout) rates among freshmen students. In recent years as many as 40 percent of freshmen have not returned for their second year. English faculty have observed an apparently related trend in their written communication classes, as evidenced by absenteeism, poor thinking, writing and reading skills in as many as 25 percent of entering students.

The traditional course of instruction has grouped students heterogeneously, with a range of backgrounds and abilities represented in each section of English 101. Both research and local faculty experience have shown that students do not benefit from being labeled as remedial or developmental writing students and placed in special classrooms. Additionally, our faculty have stressed teaching methodologies that incorporate the concepts of collaborative learning—concepts which utilize techniques such as peer editing, group critiques, and self-analysis (Brufee, 1994). These techniques, along with the more recent introduction of critical thinking models (Brookfield, 1988; Paul, 1994), have tended to work best in heterogenously grouped classes with a range of competencies represented. At the same time, the disparity between those students who are struggling with the writing

task and those who are ready to write at the college level can pose challenges for the instructor. Faculty are often frustrated in directing instruction to the needs of both groups, in classrooms whose size can reach or even exceed 27 students.

Purpose. In the spring of 1994, the South Dakota Board of Regents expressed an interest in placement and potential remediation of students in required English classes. BHSU English faculty began deliberating how to address the particular classroom arrangement with minimal disruption and within the time and budgetary constraints imposed on the department. As an outcome of these deliberations it was decided to respond to the BOR mandate by implementing a pilot program of Supplemental Instruction during the fall 1994 semester. The purpose of the study was to determine whether the general findings of the research literature could be validated in beginning college writing classrooms. Specific questions included: What effect did SI have on student writing, course grades, failure, and attrition?

Procedure. Of the sixteen English 101 sections, five experimental sections were selected to participate in the pilot program, together with five control sections taught by the same instructors. Tutors regularly attended an assigned section of English 101 and participated in class activities within boundaries established by each instructor. In addition, tutors met with students from their assigned class at the Academic Skills Center. A series of training sessions for tutors, conducted by English faculty, was held on a regular basis during the semester. Topics included: holistic scoring, revision, oral reading techniques, and sharing and responding methods.

To measure the effectiveness of the program, a diagnostic essay (EDE) was administered to 400 of 429 English 101 students, based on a common essay prompt and

scored holistically by the entire English faculty. The prompt and resulting student essays were not subsequently discussed in class. The same diagnostic essay was administered at the end of the semester, making possible a comparison between scores in experimental, control, and remaining (non-participating) sections. Questionnaires were also given to participating students to obtain further data on the SI program.

Results. Demographic information on English 101 students was examined for correlations between the first and second EDE score, ACT-English scores, and percentile high school class rank. These correlations did not indicate a discernible relationship between the EDE and other measures of student achievement. The literature suggested a higher degree of correlation is possible using the grade students received in the course. However, these data also did not present a significant correlation between the EDE scores and the grade students received in English 101 (0.24 and 0.41, respectively). Therefore, these demographic data were not necessarily reliable predictors of success in English 101, as measured by grades in the course. In addition, these demographic data offered limited insight into the potential effectiveness of the SI program.

Despite such limitations, the data did validate the finding that SI can help students improve writing skills, raise grades, reduce failure, and lower attrition. A significant difference in the improvement in EDE scores appeared between the experimental sections (those with tutors), the control sections (those without tutors taught by the same instructors), and the remaining sections (those without tutors and with non-SI participating instructors). The increases in scores were 15.7% (experimental) and 14.0% (control). Non-participating sections had a decrease in scores of 4.3%. Course grades were also significantly different in experimental (2.6/4.0), control (2.5/4.0) and non-

participating (2.0/4.0) sections. The failure rates in experimental, control, and non-participating sections were 13.8%, 16.0%, and 21.0% respectively. Moreover, the attrition rate (those students dropping the course without taking a grade of F) was significantly different between experimental (6.1%), control (6.9%), and non-participating (9.3%) sections.

During the semester, tutors reported that students in experimental sections had better access to a tutor and felt less hesitant about asking her/him for assistance than students enrolled in other sections. These reports were confirmed through survey instruments completed by students at semester end. Some instructors mandated minimum meetings between students and tutors. Other faculty used tutors to work with individuals and/or groups with specific writing problems These intensive interventions appeared to have a positive effect on student attitudes, attendance, and performance. Collateral benefits of the SI program included: enhanced opportunities for faculty-tutor collaboration; experimentation with classroom teaching approaches; talking about writing among faculty and students; and enhanced teamwork between faculty.

Limitations of the study were: (1) A cross-validation test was performed, using a selected sample of EDE essays, comparing the scorings with those previously performed on the same sampling. The correlation on the earlier EDE was 0.31 and the later EDE was 0.70. While these correlations were within the parameters suggested by the literature, they were nevertheless lower than was hoped. (2) The later scoring of the EDE was performed under conditions where raters knew they were looking at essays written at the end of the semester. It would have been preferable to have scored all essays, earlier and later, at the same time without identifying them as such. (3) All students had access to

tutors at the Academic Skills Center, whether or not students were enrolled in SI sections. It is assumed that in these cases, tutors were functioning more in a traditional tutor-student relationship than as SI leaders. (4) Sections designated as control sections, taught by the same instructors as experimental sections, could involve possible contamination of data through the intervening variable of instruction. Instructors using tutors in their experimental sections could carry attitudes and approaches into their control sections. (5) The distinction between control and non-participating sections may have been blurred. While it was intended that the variable of SI tutoring could be isolated using paired experimental and control sections with the same instructors, the non-participating sections share all the characteristics of the control sections with the exception of instructor. (6) Under the conditions imposed by the South Dakota Board of Regents, the study had to be completed within a year of its inception. More reliable data, it is assumed, could have been obtained over a longer period of time.

Summary. The study validated the research literature findings that supplemental instruction can significantly improve student performance. SI helped students improve their writing skills, as measured by the EDE, in freshman writing courses. Students enrolled in SI sections had significantly higher improvements in EDE scores, significantly higher grades, significantly lower failure, and significantly lower attrition. The study concluded that SI can be an important tool in helping students succeed in beginning college writing courses. The SI experiment also suggested that students have a better chance of succeeding in an environment of partnership. In the SI classroom, beginning writers are encouraged to practice their writing, take risks, and share their words with caring, non-competitive peers. Students can learn that writing is not a solitary activity but

one where collaboration and community are essential. Indeed, the skills they learn in the SI classroom can help them succeed through their college years into a career of lifelong learning.

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